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SUBJECT: UNITED RUSSIA PULLS OUT ALL STOPS IN YAROSLAVL

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Classified By: Bob Patterson for reasons 1.4(d)

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) United Russia finds itself under a microscope in Yaroslavl where its poor showing in the December 2 Duma elections means the national party is closely watching its preparations for the March 2 presidential elections and hoping for better results. During a February 13-14 visit by Emboff, active political campaignQg was taking place in this "Golden Ring" region outside of Moscow, where a new Governor took the helm at the end of last year following United Russia's poor Duma campaign showing. While United Russia works to find more votes, Just Russia finds itself pulled from the March 2 ballot for the regional Duma. Other parties, notably the Liberal Democratic Party and the Communist Party have circles of loyal supporters. The local Nashi organization remains active and ardent. End summary.

MOSCOW KEEPS EYE ON UNITED RUSSIA;
JUST RUSSIA PULLED FROM BALLOT

2. (SBU) Following its third worst showing in the nation during the December 2, 2007, Duma elections, United Russia is pulling out all the stops in Yaroslavl to ensure a better turnout for its party's candidate in the March 2 presidential elections. United Russia received only 53 percent of the vote in Yaroslavl in the December Duma elections as compared to the party's nationwide showing of 64 percent. It was the third worst result for United Russia in the nation and led the Kremlin to replace Governor Anatoliy Lisitsyn with Sergey Vakhrukov. Lisitsyn has since become a member of the State Duma. During a February 13-14 visit, Emboff found an active campaign taking place in Yaroslavl where, in addition to Russia's next president, residents will elect regional Duma members and their mayor.

3. (SBU) The United Russia campaign headquarters was particularly active with staff members busily preparing for the elections and the party's chairman taking orders from Moscow. Sergey Baburkin, Chairman of United Russia Yaroslavl's Executive Committee, admitted it was a hard time for the party and that they were under pressure to improve their results. Our meeting was interrupted multiple times as he took calls from his "chief" in Moscow. Competition for the regional Duma is real, both for proportional and single-mandate seats, with nine parties represented, he told us. (NOTE: Just Russia has since been pulled from the ballot reducing the number to eight.) United Russia is fielding a full list of 25 candidates on its party list and 25 single-mandate candidates. The United Russia party list is headed by Russia's first female cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova, whose image and campaign slogan "home is where

the heart is" appears on billboards all over town and in television commercials. Despite its "poor" showing in the December elections, Baburkin expressed confidence that United Russia would not only win more than 50 percent of the vote for its party list but more than half of the single mandate seats.

14. (SBU) Baburkin said that United Russia is targeting all demographic groups, but with a particular focus on "their weak link" during the last election, namely the youth vote. He attributed the poor turnout by young voters to complications regarding in which districts students should vote. He said that this time they will ensure that students have the "real possibility to vote." United Russia is also focused on territorial differences in the results from the December elections, targeting areas that had a weak showing for United Russia, including Rybinsk, where United Russia received only 43 percent of the vote and Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR) is strong, and Ygliche.

15. (C) Representatives of other parties told us United Russia's game plan is actually less based on strategic thinking than on intimidation. Marina Kandybina, the local Chairwoman of liberal opposition party Yabloko, which is not taking part in the regional Duma campaign, told us United Russia is targeting members of Just Russia, hoping to move their votes to United Russia's column. In some cases, this has taken the form of intimidation where local authorities show up at the homes of Just Russia members asking them to prove the veracity of their signatures on party membership documents. According to Kandybina, just such an incident happened at her home when authorities showed up at 8 am to question her mother, a Just Russia member. These types of incidents were recounted by multiple people with whom we spoke in Yaroslavl.

16. (C) Stanislav Smirnov, First Secretary of the Communist Party, told us United Russia is going after Just Russia because "it too is Kremlin built and they know where the weak spots are located." While he said Just Russia may have committed some internal violations, "law enforcement should not be involved in the registration process." Just Russia may have made itself an easy target due to an internal struggle over control of the party. Its former leader, Aleksandr Tsvetkov, has left the party and is running for the regional Duma as a representative of the Patriots of Russia. The new local leader of Just Russia is State Duma Deputy Anatoliy Greshnevikov. Greshnevikov and Tsvetkov had argued over the legitimacy of Just Russia's local party conference held in January, during which their party list was formed. Supporters of Greshnevikov, who questioned the legitimacy of the conference and its delegates, took the issue to the local prosecutor who in turn presented it to the regional election commission, controlled by United Russia. The case was turned over to the regional court, which ruled February 20 that Just Russia's party list and eight single mandate candidates would be removed from the ballot for the regional Duma. The ruling said the party conference was not legitimate and that members of the militia had found that various party conference protocols had been falsified.

17. (C) Representatives of Yabloko, the Communist Party and other sources we spoke to, accused United Russia of using administrative resources to gain an edge in the campaign. United Russia's Baburkin spoke proudly of the sports centers that had been built "with direct support from United Russia." A new athletic complex will open in Yaroslavl in late February, which Baburkin claimed would be the "biggest in Russia and Europe." State Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov is expected to attend the opening. The Communist Party's Smirnov said United Russia members visit factories, plants and government agencies and give orders as to how workers should vote in the elections. Local journalist Olga Tupikova told us LDPR and the Communists are hoping the "spoiled image" of United Russia will help them do better in the elections. Their results in the State Duma elections were higher than the national outcomes, 13 and 11 percent of the

vote, respectively.

¶8. (SBU) United Russia's Baburkin was confident the current Mayor of Yaroslavl Victor Volonchunas, a member of United Russia, would be reelected. His plans for renovating Yaroslavl's many attractions and new construction in preparation for the 1000th anniversary of Yaroslavl, which will be celebrated in 2010, make re-election almost inevitable. "This part of the election is guaranteed," Baburkin told us, calling the upcoming millennium a "gift for the campaign." Support for presidential candidate Medvedev was little talked about by local political observers although it was noted that he would do well while candidates Zhirinovskiy and the Communist's Zyuganov match each other in polls. Democratic Party candidate Bogdanov, barely breaks the one percent mark, according to Yabloko's Kandybina.

IN NASHI'S CLUBHOUSE

¶9. (SBU) As part of its restructuring, the Kremlin-affiliated youth movement Nashi will maintain a regional office in Yaroslavl, one of only five in the nation (reftel). We were told by one political observer that this reflected Yaroslavl's close proximity to Moscow and its ability to mobilize activists who could be sent to Moscow when needed. Local Nashi leader Oleg Labudev told us his organization receives orders from the federal level and that the reason his organization had stayed in business was because they were more professional in their ability to organize mass patriotic actions. While Labudev emphasized Nashi's independence from political parties, he said they support Medvedev and United Russia in the upcoming elections. He told us his organization would be organizing pickets in support of United Russia. According to Labudev, Nashi in Yaroslavl has approximately 200 active members but they are able to mobilize up to 1,000 participants in mass actions.

¶10. (SBU) Labudev told us about two federal Nashi programs. The first is to defend the rights of Russians and he cited Nashi's protest actions against Estonia in response to its decision to relocate a Soviet World War II memorial as an example. Labudev noted that his involvement in this particular protest action had landed him on the EU's visa black list, something he has continued to protest by picketing, along with other Nashi members, the EU headquarters in Moscow. The second federal program is referred to as "Ten to Five within Five Years," which aims to have Russia move from among the ten most developed countries in the world to the top five within five years. Locally, Nashi is conducting education programs for its members on such topics as business development.

¶11. (SBU) The headquarters of Nashi in Yaroslavl can best be described as a multi-storied clubhouse decorated in patriotic colors, with images of Nashi and Russian leaders painted on the walls by artistic members of the movement. Nashi slogans drawn graffiti-style share space on the walls with a photo gallery of its members at the Nashi summer camp at Selinger in 2007. Their headquarters accommodates multiple offices, space for membership meetings and a large work space in the basement for the leader of the local movement, where our meeting took place.

COMMENT

¶12. (SBU) Pressure is on Yaroslavl's new Governor and the local United Russia party to perform much better than in the December Duma elections. While it is clear that everything is being done to ensure a better outcome, the reality is that too little time has passed since the last election to move a large number of votes into their support column. LDPR and the Communists remain strong, which means United Russia must find its votes elsewhere.

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